Did you ever wonder why, after only a couple of years, the storage room at the office is filled with unused equipment? Likewise, are your drawers filled with partially used trial kits of some new thingamajig?

I know I am not alone in this! Many orthodontists across the country purchase equipment and supplies without really knowing how these items will integrate into their practice.

I’ll be the first to admit that the way practices grew 20 years ago is not the way they grow today. With student-loan debt at record highs, a new practitioner can’t afford to fly by the seat of his or her pants.

I recently visited with one of my sales representatives and asked her a couple of questions about how practices grow successfully and efficiently. I also contacted a prominent practice-management firm for advice on the same topic. I posed the same questions to both and was amazed at how similar their answers were, especially since they represent completely different sides of the industry!

One of the questions I posed was this: What do you see as the changing needs of orthodontists as they move throughout their practice career, in regard to equipment and other professionals?

Here’s what I learned.

On equipment

The cold start-up is a pretty rare bird these days. In order to grow organically, as opposed to borrowing money, a business owner needs to keep equipment costs to a minimum. Below is a list of essentials to keep in mind. While not comprehensive, it serves as a good checklist and as a reminder for some things that seem obvious but can easily be forgotten in the chaos of a startup.

The initial phase of a startup is geared toward getting people in the door and sending them out with braces. Numerous experts advocate that this is the most effective advertising for the new practitioner. Aided by consultants and mentors, a new doc needs to focus on establishing brand reputation and culture. Don’t overlook the impression that your equipment can have on prospective patients. While having patients wearing braces in the community creates the buzz, you still need to have all the equipment bases covered.

Some essentials include:

A website. Keep it updated, simple and easy to navigate.

Phone system. The first impression for many people is when they speak to the person who picks up the phone in your practice. If no one picks up, have a short but informative automated system that can relay important information quickly.

Computers. Ever use a slow computer? You want to tear your hair out after a few seconds. Now imagine you and your staff using slow computers every day. Keep your computers updated and maintained.

Practice-management software. It’s a sound investment, but do your research. Is it all bells and whistles, or are you

Don’t overlook the impression that your equipment can have on prospective patients. While having patients wearing braces in the community creates the buzz, you still need to have all the equipment bases covered.

getting the kind of integration that makes everyone’s life easier and the work streamlined? Ask other orthos what they use.

Patient-education software. Dedicated resources geared to educate patients in a clear, concise manner will help boost case acceptance. If you can, create materials based on the specific services and products you have in your practice.

Continued on p. 26
Reception room. Would you want to spend time in your reception area? If not, change it up with comfortable seating, nice lighting, drinks, reading materials, an area for children, and Wi-Fi. Make this area feel like a living room.

Record-gathering materials. Patients don’t want to fill out the same information three times. Streamline how you collect, archive and locate records.

**Imaging:** There are a lot of imaging solutions out there. Ask around and ask people you trust. Check to see if it is easily integrated into your practice-management software.

**Pan/ceph:** Have a setup that is easy and fast. This is a big investment, so don’t rush the decision.

**CBCT:** This is getting more and more traction every year. If you make the leap to CBCT, make sure it’s a well-researched decision.

**Digital camera:** Today’s DSLRs come with more options than you may realize. There are some great accessories that can really streamline image capturing, such as wireless transfer systems that send the photos straight to your computer.

Sterilization and sanitation. Read up on the systems available on the market and ask for feedback from staff and colleagues.

**Autoclaves, ultrasonic cleaners, etc.** Ask about timers, noise levels, available features, capacity, durability and warranty. You get what you pay for.

**Dental units.** This is a cornerstone of your practice. This is where you and your patients will spend most of their time. Never downplay the importance of ergonomics.

**Chairs:** If you’re not comfortable in the chair after 10 minutes, don’t expect your patients to be comfortable for the duration of their visit. Price isn’t everything with chairs. Pick something ergonomically designed and comfortable.

**Side-delivery units, over-the-patient units, or rear-delivery unit systems:** Each one has its pros and cons. Side systems require less trunk twisting, but generally lock the operator into one position. Over systems allow more operator freedom but may require more upward reaching for shorter docs. Rear systems work better for general dentistry, as all instruments are behind the patient (out of sight, out of mind) and are generally the least-expensive systems to have installed—but they generally require the most reaching and turning.

**Lights:** Different lights have different functions. Keep in mind lamp types, portability, focal lengths and simplicity in the controls. You need a light, not a space station.

**Handpieces:** Trust the recommendation of your peers who have been doing it a long time, or go with what feels right in your hand. Read up on proper handpiece maintenance and you can save a lot of money over the years.

**Early growth items to be added within two years**

Laboratory equipment expenses can be kept to a minimum because you may use an external lab.

Fortunately, clear-formed retainers are not only the most effective at holding teeth in position, but they also can be fabricated in the office. In my experience, expanding the laboratory side of operations was the next phase of building out an orthodontic practice, not only for retainers, but for bleaching and mouthguards as well. Some key points to cover when expanding a practice:

- Laboratory equipment
- Pressure- or vacuum-forming machine
- Electric handpiece
- Lathe with suction
- Sandblaster for removing acrylic from brackets
- Welder for attachments
- Enhanced computer software for radiography
- Enhanced telephone systems

**Practice differentiation**

Once the practice is off the ground and bills are being paid, your focus should shift to deciding how to differentiate your practice to ensure constant growth.
Ample products and systems are available to differentiate you from the competition. At this point, you should determine a practice-growth strategy with attention to expanding locations and hours. Here are the key areas that impact practice differentiation:

- More imaging, with upgraded or new CBCT technology
- Lasers for in-office minor periodontal sculpting and procedures
- Cosmetic appliances and Invisalign
- SureSmile
- Airway and sleep apnea evaluation
- Smile analysis with articulation, software and imaging
- Further lab expansion
- 3D printing
- Indirect bonding with acrylic curing
- Custom mouthguards and other appliances

**Transition phase or growth phase**

Years ahead of this phase, a plan should be in place to get you there. If growth is the goal, this phase starts sooner, rather than later. If transition is the choice, you must maintain your cutting edge up to and including the addition of an associate.

Establishing the estimated practice value and exit plan is best accomplished before you actually attempt to sell the practice. It’s best to retain a consultant at this point, even if you are not ready to leave or bring on an associate. Before any kind of a transition, these two goals will make a huge difference in the outcome:

- Upgrade reception area and office décor
- Digital upgrade for speed and features

If you’re not comfortable in the chair after 10 minutes, don’t expect your patients to be comfortable for the duration of their visit. Price isn’t everything with chairs.

Decisions on equipment purchases should be made using a coherent business plan. In order to avoid ending up with a spare room filled with outdated or unwrapped equipment and supplies, a strategy for growth and transition needs to be in place. Equipment purchases should be made with a clear purpose for their use in the overall managing of the business.

As always, if you have a question you can look to your peers and the members of Orthotown for advice, guidance and discussion. Another great resource is our annual Townie Choice Awards. Our Orthotown readers and members voted for their favorite products, equipment and services and those opinions can help you with any purchasing category. See the results in the January/February issue of Orthotown Magazine or online at Orthotown.com/TCA.